HOW TO PHYSICALLY STORE AND WORK WITH YOUR MAILING LIST

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HOW TO PHYSICALLY STORE AND WORK WITH YOUR MAILING LIST

Whenever you add information to your list, follow procedures for keeping it clean, analyze the contents, or use it to prepare a mailing, you will be working with the names on the list. In other words, you will be accessing the list frequently, so you must be able to do so quickly and efficiently. Your success here depends largely on how information is physically stored.

FACTORS IN CHOOSING YOUR STORAGE MEDIUM

How you decide to store your list physically will depend on a number of factors:

1.	Number of names on the list.
2.	How often you mail to the list.
3.	How frequently you update the list.
4.	Whether you mail to the entire list, or just certain parts of the list.
5.	The equipment you have available.
6.	The expense you are willing to incur to store and use your list.
7.	Whether you store only mailing information on the list or maintain database information as well.

In the rest of this report, we will describe the most common methods available for physically storing the mailing list.

MANUAL STORAGE

Manual storage is considered most appropriate for start-up businesses or small organizations that do not have a microcomputer and:

*	have relatively stable lists that do not need to be updated often.

*	send out mailings infrequently.

*	use straightforward mailing strategies: sending each mailing to the entire list, for example.

*	do not have a database and use only basic mailing information.

Manual storage usually involves using one of two systems, a tickler file (or index card system) or a copier label system.

1.	Tickler file or index card system: With this system, the information for each name on the list is entered on an individual card. When an update is made, 	the card must usually be rewritten or retyped. In order to prepare a mailing with 	this storage system, each of the pieces mailed must be addressed individually, by 	hand or by typewriter.

2.	Copier label system: Copier label systems are more convenient for

updating and mailing than ticker file or index card systems.

Most copier label systems work on the same principles. A master grid comes with each box of labels. Place the grid behind a sheet of paper so the lines show through. Type names on a plain sheet of paper into the spaces created by the grid lines. (Most systems give you spaces for 33 names per sheet.) To create labels, load the blank labels into the copier and copy the sheet of names onto them.

A more flexible copier label system is one in which the "grid" is a clear sheet protector with 33 pockets. First type names and addresses on individual cards, and insert them in pockets. Then, this page of cards is copied onto a sheet of blank labels. This copier label system allows you to add, delete and update information card by card without retyping the entire list. The printed grid sheet can also be easily maintained by using self adhesive labels to update and cover the names on the master sheet.

With either of these systems, you can generally store only name and address information. Any other database information must be stored separately.

MICROCOMPUTER STORAGE

With microcomputers and software becoming more affordable and offering a wide variety of applications and functions, businesses and organizations of all sizes have increasingly turned to them for their mailing list needs.

This report will review some of the elements involved in choosing to automate the mailing list on a microcomputer rather than continue to use manual storage system.

Microcomputer storage offers businesses and organizations several clear advantages over manual storage systems.

Advantages of Microcomputer Storage

1.   Flexibility: Many mailing list software packages now offer such features as easy updating and sorting as well as the ability to categorize by code and custom format the label output.

2.   Versatility: Many packages combine the features needed for mailing list management with the ability to store, update, retrieve and analyze database information. Other programs also include general business functions.

3.   Efficiency: Microcomputer storage reduces the need for repetitively handling the same information. Once a name has been entered into the computer, the record can be quickly and easily accessed and enhanced, saving time and effort.

4.   Economy: Because you can easily pre-sort the labels by zip code, and if you mail at lease 200 pieces, you can take advantage of postal discounts.

5.   Space-saving: Automated mailing lists usually fit on one or two diskettes or occupy a small section of a hard disk, eliminating the need for storing reams of paper or boxes of cards.

Later in this report we will describe a number of types of microcomputer software that include mailing list functions.

First we want to address the concerns of a small business or organization that is deciding whether or not to store its mailing list on a microcomputer. What are some of the factors that might influence that decision?

CHOOSING MICROCOMPUTER STORAGE

Your decision to use a microcomputer to store the mailing list is easier if the business or organization already has a microcomputer. Putting your list on the computer will be relatively inexpensive even if you must purchase software.

If the business or organization does not have a computer, the following issues may influence your decision:

1.	How many names are onthe list? While there is no hard and fast rule, a list of more than several hundred names is unwieldy to handle manually.

2.	Would your decisions about promotional mailings (who to mail for specific offers) benefit from the ability to store and analyze database information for the names on your mailing list?

3.	Do you frequently want to target only a portion of the list with a mailing? For example, do you want to contact only those customers who have recently purchased a certain item? Or, do you want to mail only to customers in a specific geographic area?

4.	Are there other areas in your business or organization that could be automated to distribute the cost of the microcomputer across several functions? (In many cases, though, the mailing list function alone will pay for the microcomputer.)

If you do decide to store the mailing list on a microcomputer, you will want to use the software that is appropriate for your needs. The will require consideration of future and current mailing list and database needs, as well as the need to automate other areas of the business or organization.

MICROCOMPUTER SOFTWARE

Some software packages are designed primarily for mailing list management. Other packages include mailing list management capabilities along with other business applications. Below is a description of six basic categories of software packages currently on the market that are either devoted only to mailing list management or that include mailing list functions. (Within each category, there are specific packages that may have more or fewer features than those described below.)

1.	Mailing List Software

Mailing list software is designed specifically for mailing list management. As a rule, this type of software:

* stores only basic mailing information for each name.

* does not have database capabilities

* prints a variety of formats such as label, envelope, name, badge, post/index card and list.

* limits the data for each name to about five or six fields, lines, or data.

* offers basic editing functions such as adding, changing or deleting.

* has a list price of between $39 and $100.

2. Word Processing Software

The primary function of word processing software is the production of memos, letters and reports. Some packages also have mailing list storage and generation capabilities as well as the function that allows you to "merge" the names on your list with a document you want to mail.

Word processing packages cost between $70 and $495. (Generally, price differences do not reflect variations in mailing list capabilities. Rather, higher-priced packages may have additional features such as built-in spelling or dictionary functions or might offer special applications such as footnoting.)

3. Database Software

Database software packages come with many different features and a wide range in price. These packages are basically designed to help you collect and manage data.

The lower-priced packages, ranging from $190 to $300, could more appropriately be called "file management" software. They offer few fields for storing data and few options for manipulating and sorting the data. These packages are sufficient for simple mailing functions that use only names and addresses.

The higher-priced programs in this category, ranging in price from $399 to $699, are quite versatile. They can store, update, retrieve, tabulate and analyze data beyond simple mailing information. You can usually specify the custom print formats when generating labels.

These database programs can also summarize and analyze data statistically. Because of this capability, they can also be useful in market research, for questionnaire data entry, tabulation and analysis.

4. Integrated Applications Software

This is the most sophisticated of the software packages you might use for mailing list management. Integrated applications software includes a combination of several applications that work together. For example, one package may provide word processing, spreadsheet, database and graphics functions.

The mailing list function is usually part of the database or word processing feature in an integrated package.

Buying an integrated package can be slightly more expensive than purchasing single-function software: the price range is from $150 to $795. However, purchasing an integrated package assures that the data used in one application will be easily and quickly transferable to the other functions in the package. If you use separate, non-integrated packages, you may have to be concerned about issues of program compatibility.

Integrated packages are a particularly good choice if you need a computer to perform functions other than those associated with your mailing list, for example, word processing, billing, budgeting and financial analysis. These packages allow you to spread the cost of the package across a number of areas.

5.   Vertical Software

Vertical software refers to software packages that fit the needs of a specific type of business or organization. These packages are "tailored" and usually integrate all the appropriate applications although some of the less expensive packages may address only one function.

One example of vertical software is a software package for doctors' offices. The package may include invoicing and income statement/balance sheet systems as well as a database for maintaining patient mailing information, appointment history and medical history. The manufacturers of vertical software have studied the industry and included fields for all appropriate database information. In other words, they've eliminated the need for you to do it.

Vertical software is now available for many occupations and not-for-profit organizations.

6.   Custom Software

Another alternative to buying software off the shelf is to have a package custom designed for your needs. Although this can be very expensive, it at lease guarantees that the program specifically meets your needs. Custom software also an incorporate the advantages of vertical packages with more specific database needs.

Your ability to use the mailing list efficiently and effectively is affected by the way you physically store the list. After you consider the options and make your choice, you are ready to use the mailing list to the fullest.